

NEWS RELEASE

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Hampton residents say they want to protect and invest in city and schools; input meetings continue Saturday

Residents got their first chance Tuesday night to offer input to Hampton city and school officials on next year's budget in a meeting at Kecoughtan High School. The 140 in attendance saw some cuts on the lists they could live with, but the overall message was: It's time to protect the services we have and to invest in the future.

Using keypads, residents voted on more than 40 potential city and school cuts for next year. At the end, half agreed that this statement best summed up their views: "I am willing to raise the tax rate to protect current services, and I want to invest in capital/technological needs." Another 40 percent said they were willing to raise the tax rate to protect some or all of the current services. Only 9 percent said they would prefer to disinvest in order to maintain the current tax rate.

Not many cuts were supported by an outright majority, though some were, especially those that didn't involve direct service to the majority of residents. Regional and tourism attractions such as Bay Days, the Hampton Cup Regatta, the Tennis Center's clay courts and the Visitors Center were efforts that a majority could live without. Citizens also supported cuts that would affect businesses, such as increasing time for review of plans and building code inspections. About three-quarters agreed that closing the aging Old Hampton Community Center and eliminating the Citizens Unity Commission were acceptable.

The potential cuts that drew the most opposition were: closing the branch libraries, eliminating financial support for volunteer fire companies, eliminating school crossing guards and family and infant programs, closing Bluebird Gap Farm, and reducing the mowing of parks and school grounds and the number of streetlights.

Tuesday was the first time Hampton City Schools joined the city in polling for budget input. A majority at the meeting expressed opposition to cutting the number of classes high school students can take, increasing class size, and reducing elementary art, music and physical education. They supported closing Moton Early Childhood Center and moving the classes into other elementary schools, eliminating the middle school team approach, having elementary schools share assistant principals and replacing some of the registered nurses with licensed practical nurses.

Half of the audience was 50 or older, half lived in the 23669 ZIP code, and more than three-quarters were white. Future budget input sessions will move to other areas of the city. Residents are encouraged to give their feedback:

- Saturday, March 2, 9-11 a.m., Bethel High School
- Thursday, March 7, 6:30-8:30 p.m., Hampton High School
- Saturday, March 9, 9-11 a.m., Ruppert Sargent Building, first floor conference room

The polling sessions will not automatically determine what the final budgets for schools and city operations contain. City Manager Mary Bunting has polled residents for the past 3 years and considers the early input vital in helping her gauge what residents consider most important. Nonetheless, she also weighs long-term costs, legal obligations and the input she receives in other ways. The City Council will make the decision on the city budget, including the overall level of local funding for schools, and the School Board will determine the school budget.

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